



Cultivating the Master Gardener Program

PARTICIPANTS

PEL TEAM: Andrew Allen, Cory Goracke-Postle, Daniel Jones-White, Michelle Overtom, Amber Schultz  **PROJECT SPONSOR:** Julie Weisenhorn, University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener Program

BACKGROUND

The University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener Program began in 1977 with a class of 25 people. Since then, the program has grown to over 2,200 volunteers statewide that contributed over 128,000 volunteer hours in 2010.

With this growth has come a need for change. In 2011, the program began a restructuring process. As part of this process, a need was identified to generate additional revenue for the Master Gardener Program. One possible source of revenue would be an online gardening education series available to professional and casual gardeners. This project sought to explore the viability of this proposed series and provide recommendations for moving forward.

PROCESS









THE EDUCATION SERIES

The University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener Program in collaboration with the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum would develop the online education series. It would be comprised of learning modules based on the horticulture content taught in HORT 1003: Horticulture for the Home Garden also referred to as the Master Gardener Core Course. Unlike the Core Course, participants would not have a volunteer obligation to Extension or the Arboretum nor would they carry the title of "Master Gardener" upon completion of the education series.

Learning modules in the series would focus on topics such as herbaceous plants, trees and shrubs, indoor plants, soils and composting, lawn care, and vegetable gardening. Individuals would be able to customize their learning experience by selecting modules of interest in any order and would have access to content for up to one year. The class series would be self-directed and modules could be completed at one's own pace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It was clear that focus group participants and survey respondents were interested in the possibility of the online gardening class. Several recommendations are presented based on their feedback.

-  Redevelop, don't just redesign, the Master Gardener Core Course for a new audience. Focus group participants stated the online course should be "fresh" and go beyond reusing content from the Core Course.
-  Keep price point low. Survey respondents reported spending most of their gardening budget on process and supplies; little was budgeted for education.
-  Set clear expectations for course participants. Be clear that this is not an alternative to the Core Course, but a new course opportunity.
-  Balance the desire of students to move through the course at their own pace with the desire to interact with the instructor and other participants.
-  Start small and focus on perennials and vegetable gardening. These two topics were of most interest to survey respondents.
-  Research costs for web design and maintenance of the course. Focus group participants stated that they expected content for an online course to be updated frequently and incorporate video, online quizzes, chat, and other features.

